



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Actuary Morphs Into Coach

by Gerald A. Fryer

*"Every exit is an entry somewhere else."
—Tom Stoppard*

The nontraditional phase of my career has just begun. In this article I will explain why coaching was a logical, if somewhat surprising, career option for my phase 2, and how my practice will be able to support my original profession.

Beginnings

Why did you enter your profession? The common thread that connects most actuaries is an affinity for mathematics, along with a preference for business applications. In addition, I had the equivalent (it was 1969, before these terms achieved general currency) of a personal mission statement when I started out:

"To improve the financial security of Canadians."

You probably had hopes and dreams for your career as well, going beyond merely financial ones, in terms of making a contribution to your chosen profession or to society in general.

The "Actuary Phase"

I spent my entire first career at a single insurance company. Given the times, this experience was never dull—in fact, it became increasingly fascinating as inflation heated up, product innovation grew and competition increased rapidly. I experienced the usual planned and unplanned moves from area to area along with gradual upward movement in the organization. I had the luxury of concentrating on building my technical skills, relatively sheltered from events in the outside world compared to what was to come.

Bearing in mind my original mission, I gravitated to product development work and was always keen to balance the company's desire for its profit targets with exceptional customer value, be it price competitiveness or some degree of product differentiation. This led to

working with our marketing people, as well as speaking publicly at our branches and other forums, which I thoroughly enjoyed.

There is nothing more instructive than working in a high performing team under a great leader, which I had the immense good fortune to do on a few occasions—particularly when one has experienced its opposite. Because of this exposure, I began to study the difference between good and poor leaders, as well as the characteristics of productive and non-productive teams.

I was part of the organization's middle management, although that term was something of a misnomer, as I headed up small teams that never exceeded three or four people. Looking back, what really invigorated my career from time to time was the high-potential people—actuarial students and others—who worked with me. Together, we produced vast amounts of quality work. We were more or less partners; we had great discussions about what we were doing and why; they generated new ideas; they were not afraid to fail; and invariably they proved to be successful later on in their careers. When we moved on to do other things, I felt a real sense of loss.

In the early 1990s, as Canadian life insurance company consolidation became a looming reality, my own company began to respond with internal reorganizations, new strategic plans and then employee training initiatives to support the empowerment that followed. Suddenly we were taking courses about possibility thinking, changing ingrained habits and attitudes, how to visualize and imprint stretch targets and then inventing the means to get there, and so on.

I was so taken with the power of this new information for driving change that I facilitated these courses for other staff members on a number of occasions.

Everything came together in 1997, when I became the leader of a start-up business unit of 40 people. This was a tremendous learning experience in people management, strategic plan-



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ning, legacy systems replacement and leading edge concepts such as the balanced scorecard. Theory became reality, as everything I had learned about leadership, team-building and change management was now translated into real-time planning and decision making.

The profit center proved to be successful in many dimensions: organizational development, process management, customer research and profitability. What was clear to me, though, was that it was all contingent on tackling the people issues that are at the heart of so many business problems.

Choosing Coaching

The forces of consolidation did not exempt my prior company. After a period of rest and relaxation, I realized that I could pursue multiple growth possibilities. The experiences and opportunities of the actuary phase, while they gradually and perhaps inevitably led me away from pure actuarial work, opened up many new career vistas. The most powerful of these experiences was working with high-potential people over the course of my career—in helping others to grow and change, I had become transformed.

Coaching turned out to be an opportunity to work with people who are motivated to change their lives in some way. I am delighted to discover a new learning and growth opportunity that meshes so well with my own latent interests.

The essence of personal coaching is that coach and client form a collaborative and dynamic relationship, in which the coach is at the service of the client in forwarding the latter's agenda for growth. The client is responsible for the content of the relationship, while the coach structures the ongoing process and their conversations, so that the client is better able to achieve their goals in whatever areas of life they choose. The coach asks questions—the client is considered to have the answers or to be able to find them. In this respect (and others), coaching is distinct from consulting and therapy.

This is very different from actuarial mathematics! However, what a coach does on an intensive basis resembles what an actuary who has evolved into a management role does when they have their coaching hat on, with one ex-

ception: the accountability for results in the intensive coaching relationship lies completely with the client.

So was there a logical path from the actuary I had become to entering the coaching profession? The reader may have picked up the clues:

- **Helping**—The original mission to improve financial security has changed into helping specific individuals make progress with what matters in their lives.
- **Entrepreneurship**—From being a leader and an entrepreneur to setting up my own practice.
- **Amateur to Professional Coach**—The multiple experiences I had had with high-potential employees were quasi-coaching, before I even knew the meaning of the word.
- **Facilitation**—The in-house seminar facilitation experience was an introduction to coaching on a group basis, as well as to some of the coaching concepts.
- **Shared Experience**—Years of being in an increasingly exposed financial services company provide an experience base for coaching those who are exposed now.

Giving Back

The 2003 SOA white paper entitled “Long Term Growth & Vitality of the Actuarial Profession,” while noting the strengths of the profession and its members, pointed out our weaknesses in areas such as:

- Communication
- Focusing on the big picture
- Proactive approach
- Taking informed, bold risks
- Business acumen

The Management and Personal Development Section is tasked with helping actuaries develop these “business savvy” skills—but the ultimate responsibility lies with the individual.

In Canada, a CIA Task Force on Enhancing the Demand for Actuaries reported its agreement with the SOA white paper's direction in early 2004, with one major addendum. The task force felt that mergers and acquisitions (M&A) activity had led to a “burning platform” north of the border, as numerous mid-career actuaries

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are out of work or are soon to be identified as redundant. These are the people who can benefit most immediately by developing some or all of the skills noted in the previous paragraph.

My primary direction in coaching will be to focus on actuaries who want to upgrade their business savvy skills, either inside or outside their current career.

Looking Forward

"The greatest good you can do for another is not just share your riches, but to reveal to him his own."

—Benjamin Disraeli

Coaching is a relatively new profession, but it already has a rich literature dedicated to the

most effective methodologies to move people to greater levels of growth and fulfillment in their lives. In the co-active coaching model that I have described, it is interesting that each coach/client relationship is customized to that client's needs—reminiscent of a universal life approach.

The coach's challenge is to bring their coaching toolkit, as well as their own life skills, to bear on each situation in order to help the client. This leads to my newly updated mission statement:

"To help actuaries and others achieve greater levels of career and personal satisfaction." □

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Ethical behavior is still critical. The complexity of the financial services industry can make it easier to take advantage of the consumer or the shareholder. Actuaries still have a role to protect the shareholder and the consumer.

Our work is still very interesting. Using our skills to solve a wide variety of business problems is fun!

What will the future look like?

Given the direction of interest rates over the last 20 years, I'm predicting that in 2011, interest rates will range between minus 5 percent and plus 25 percent.

In addition to that, I expect the pace of change to continue to accelerate. We will be challenged to keep up with the change and to increase our comfort with ambiguity.

The retirement of the baby boomers will change the world in ways we can't imagine. This will have a tremendous social and economic impact. Will retirement, as we know it, go away? Will the stock market crash and interest rates plummet as the baby boomers move their money to more conservative investments? Will retirement and health systems crumble under their weight? I don't know ... but actuaries will be key players in meeting these challenges. □